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***Perceptions of Ethiopian Teachers and Principals on Quality of Education***



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***ISSUE PAPER***  
***PERCEPTIONS OF ETHIOPIAN TEACHERS AND***  
***PRINCIPALS ON QUALITY OF EDUCATION***

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## INTRODUCTION, CONTEXT, AND RELEVANCE

Stagnating or declining quality of education has become an important issue in developing countries that are expanding enrolments rapidly toward 2015 Education for All goals within the context of severely limited resources. At the same time that education systems are overstretched, many are implementing reforms based on constructivist, student-centered, and active-learning classroom approaches that, although excellent in their goals for student learning, are complicated to implement. These combined factors in many cases present challenges for improving education quality.

There is no universal definition of education quality.<sup>1</sup> Each country's policies define quality explicitly or implicitly according to its own economic, political, social, and cultural visions. Virtually all countries, however, include two key elements as the basis of quality: students' cognitive learning (which is what achievement tests usually measure) and their social, creative, inter-personal, and emotional development. Cognitive learning is the major explicit objective of most education systems and is often used as the sole indicator of quality, although there is wide disagreement on what to measure as cognitive learning and how to measure it. Learners' social, creative, and emotional development is rarely assessed in a significant way or included in cross-national "league tables" of educational outcomes (Leu 2005; UNESCO 2004, p. 29).

In the search for ways to improve quality of education, most countries increasingly focus on understanding complex interactions that take place at the school, classroom, and community levels as the primary engines of quality and as a way of engaging local actors to address the frequently weak link between policy and practice (Farrell 2002). Of the factors that contribute to education quality at the local level, quality of teaching is recognized as the key, the factor without which other quality inputs are unlikely to be successful (ADEA 2004; ADEA 2005; Anderson 2002; Boyle et al. 2003; LeCzel 2004; UNESCO 2004; UNESCO 2006; USAID/EQUIP1 2004; USAID/EQUIP2 2006).

A recent study of teacher quality and teacher professional development in Ethiopia carried out under the USAID/EQUIP1 Leader Award examined teachers' and principals' perspectives on education quality as the first stage of the study (Asgedom et al. 2006). Carried out by researchers from Addis Ababa University, the study included in-depth qualitative interviews with a core group of 24 grade 4 teachers in 12 focus schools, three schools each in Amhara, Oromia, Southern Nations, Nationalities and People's (SNNP), and Tigray Regional States. In-depth interviews were also carried out with principals of the 12 schools. To compare how teachers and principals talked about quality with teachers' classroom practice, we observed the teaching of the 24 core teachers. To illuminate the information from the in-depth interviews and observations, we carried out focus-group discussions with six to eight teachers in each school (about 86 teachers total) and 439 grade 4 teachers from the four regional states completed a quantitative survey questionnaire that explored their perspectives on issues and practice related to education quality.

This issue paper focuses on what we can learn from understanding teachers' and principals' perceptions of quality of education, drawing on information from the Ethiopia study. The paper addresses questions of how teachers and principals conceptualize and understand quality of

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<sup>1</sup> USAID/EQUIP1 recently published literature review of education quality and teacher learning: "Quality of Education and Teacher Learning: A Review of the Literature," Elizabeth Leu and Alison Price-Rom, 2006.

education, quality of teaching, and quality of learning. Understanding teachers' and principals' perspectives on quality is particularly important because they are the professionals primarily responsible for interpreting and implementing the constructivist, active-learning, and student-centered pedagogical approaches to improving education quality that underlie the reform policies of Ethiopia and many other countries. Understanding the way in which Ethiopian educators perceive quality of education, within their own policy and practice context, may help identify challenges to implementing the reform policies as well as points of intervention to improve the effectiveness and success of the new policies. The issue paper focuses on what we have learned from local stakeholders' perceptions of quality as well as on how the process itself - dialogue at the local level - can be used both to inform and to mobilize policy.

## **TEACHERS' AND PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY FROM IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS**

The findings in the four regional states suggest very similar patterns of teacher and principal understanding of the concepts of quality of education, quality of teaching, and quality of learning. In general, the discussion of quality in the interviews followed the language of familiar national policies. At times it was not clear if the educators were stating what they heard were the current reform ideas or whether they were expressing ideas about which they had thought deeply and with which they had come to agree. Teachers and principals in the four regional states were asked to describe and discuss their ideas of quality of education, quality of teaching, and quality of learning. The stakeholders' responses fell into three clear categories - input, process, and output factors. These three aspects of quality are combined in the summary below.

*Input factors:* Teachers and principals in the four regional states believe that quality education is dependent on input factors, such as resources, teachers, and the community. Teachers and principals emphasized the importance of sufficient resources, such as textbooks, desks, teaching materials, libraries, and classrooms. They strongly believe that without these essential items, they are unable to deliver quality education. Teachers are also considered a crucial resource. Both principals and teachers stressed the need for qualified teachers who have appropriate subject knowledge and pedagogical skills. They view community involvement as an important determinant of quality education, including teachers' interactions with parents as well as the communities' financial and other contributions to schools. Some of the principals mentioned another input that they associated with education quality - the external situation of the children, their socio-economic conditions, and their living conditions.

*Process factors:* Process quality factors relate to teachers' and students' activities and interactions in the classroom. In all cases, teachers and principals included a student-centered approach in their definitions of education quality. Part of their definition of a student-centered approach was to know students well, nurture a variety of students' talents, approach them in a holistic manner, and to build a supportive learning environment in school and through linkages with parents. Teachers and principals overwhelmingly explained quality education in terms of student participation and asking questions to build their self-confidence. They also referred to the importance of employing various teaching strategies and materials to motivate students as well as continuously assessing student performance. Teachers and principals also reported that, as a part of education quality, teachers should function as role models to students, upholding the schools' rules and following the curriculum. The importance of the teacher's role in building strong

relationships with students and communities was emphasized throughout the interviews as an important part of education quality.

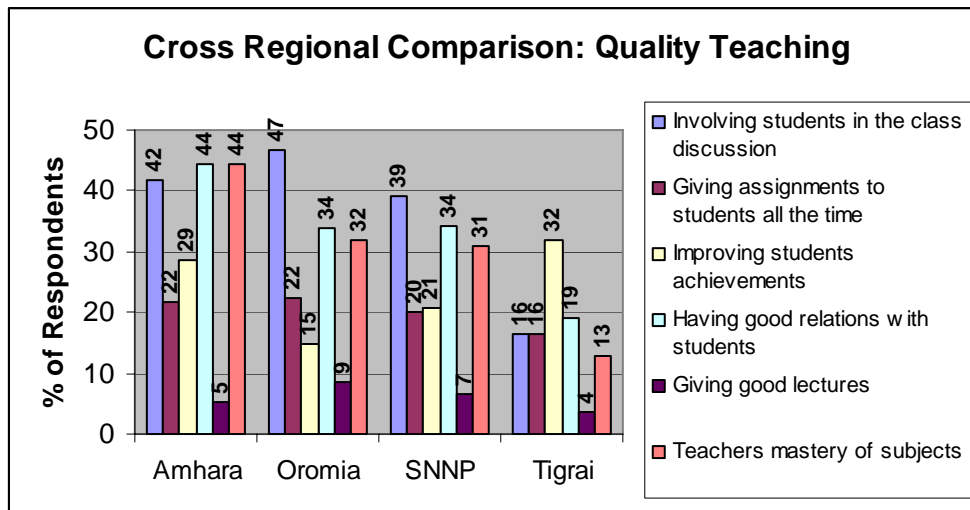
*Output factors:* Research participants in all regions drew a link between educational quality and learning outcomes. These educators mentioned outcomes such as scoring high on exams and achieving promotion to the next grade as central to education quality. However, in their discussion of quality they emphasized affective aspects (students' behavior, attitudes, and interpersonal characteristics) of active learning such as the nature and extent of students' participation and cooperation with each other and the growth of their self-confidence. Teachers and principals also frequently defined quality in terms of how students behave in school - adhering to the rules and regulations as well as attending regularly and punctually. Finally, educators indicated that quality learning involves students demonstrating and using what they have learned in practical settings in their everyday lives.

### TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY FROM THE TEACHER SURVEY

The quantitative results of the teacher questionnaires also reveal similarities across the four regional states in areas associated with quality of education: 1) quality teaching, 2) successful teaching strategies, 3) good student learning, and 4) successful learning. The questionnaire was structured so that teachers did not make either/or choices among alternatives, but indicated all responses that they felt were important.

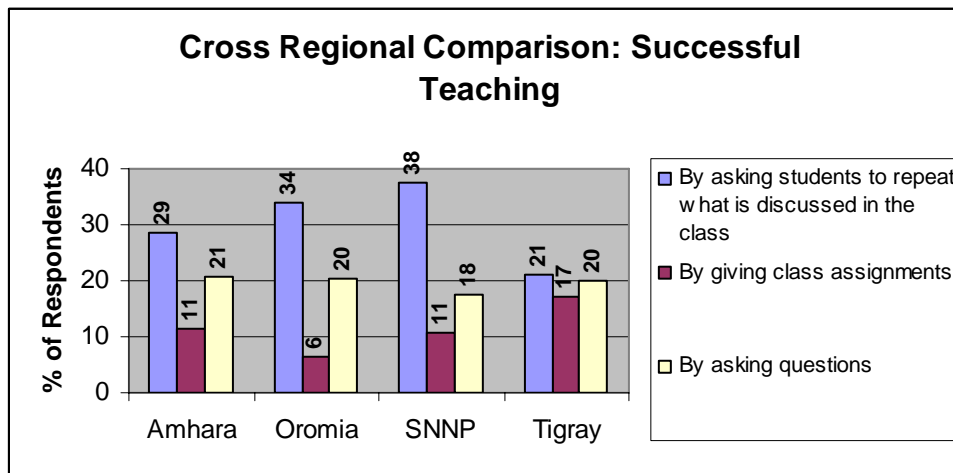
*1) Quality teaching:* Figure 1 shows responses to the question: What does quality teaching mean? Teachers in three of the four regional states chose "involving students in class discussion" and "having good relations with students" most frequently. This is consistent with the findings from the interviews and focus groups which highlighted the importance that teachers and principals place on affective (students' classroom behavior, interactions, and participation and teachers' positive relationships with students) dimensions of student learning. Note, however, that teachers in Tigray chose "improving students' achievements" most frequently.

**Figure 1: Cross-regional Comparison: Quality Teaching**



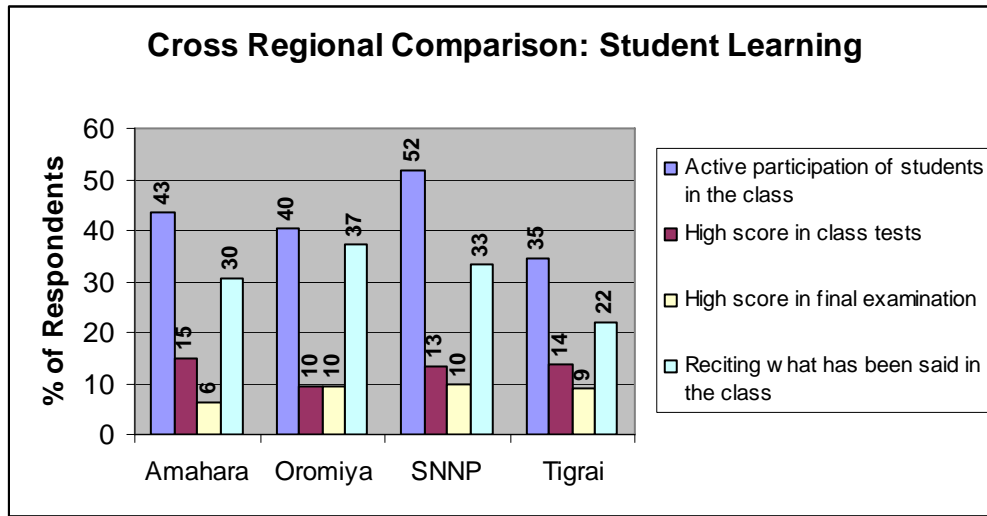
2) *Successful teaching strategies*: Figure 2 shows responses to the question: How do you ensure successful teaching in your classroom? The most frequent choice in all four regions was “asking students to repeat what is discussed in the class.” This response was particularly high in SNNP and Oromia. While the Tigray survey showed this as the favored teaching strategy, the percentage is much lower and almost equaled the response “by asking questions.” The response, “by asking questions,” was the second most common in all of the regional states. These findings correspond to the classroom observations which suggested that in groups and in classroom discussions students frequently were asked to find simple “correct” answers to questions rather than to analyze information, construct new knowledge, or communicate independently.

**Figure 2: Cross-regional Comparison: Successful Teaching**



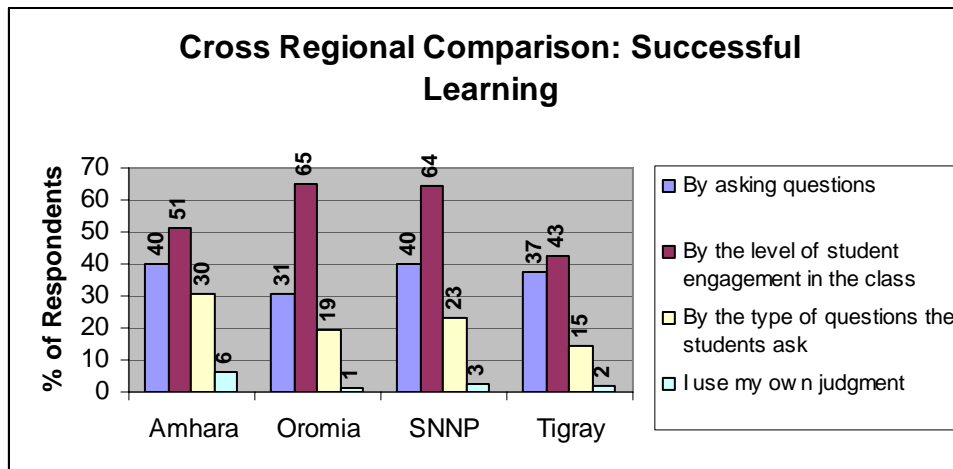
3) *Student learning*: Figure 3 shows responses to the question: What does good student learning mean? Teachers chose “active participation of students in class” most frequently, followed relatively closely by “reciting what has been said in class.” They chose performance on tests and examinations much less frequently. This is consistent with the interviews in which teachers and principals talked about the importance of academic achievement, but gave greater emphasis to students participating actively in class. The importance given here to reciting in class suggests that despite active-learning policies, teachers still focus on memory-based goals in the classroom. This was also indicated in the classroom observations.

**Figure 3: Cross-regional Comparison: Student Learning**



4) *Successful learning*: Figure 4 shows responses to the question: How do you determine or assess that successful learning has taken place in your classroom? The teachers' responses identify the level of students' engagement in the class as the main indicator of successful learning in all four regional states, although the percentages are particularly high in Oromia and SNNP and lowest in Tigray. This corresponds to the emphasis given in the interviews to classroom interactions as indicating quality learning.

**Figure 4: Cross-regional Comparison: Successful Learning**



## CRITICAL ISSUES IN PERCEPTIONS OF QUALITY

Four important issues emerge from the findings of the study concerning teachers' and principals' perceptions of education quality: 1) the balance between cognitive and affective aspects of active learning; 2) inconsistency in the results on active learning and rote learning; 3) the possibility of building on success in affective areas of active learning; and 4) the importance of examining stakeholders' perceptions of quality and including stakeholders in planning processes. These

areas all suggest ways forward in improving educational quality based on engaging local actors and understanding their perceptions of quality and practices related to quality.

*1) Balance between cognitive and affective aspects of active learning:* In the interviews, teachers and principals talked more about active participation of students in class and changes in their behavior than they did about students' cognitive learning achievement. In the survey, teachers placed relatively little importance on student tests and examination results as compared with students' active participation in class. This signals an imbalance between teachers' understanding and practice of the affective (or student behavioral) and cognitive dimensions of student-centered teaching and active student learning. While promoting these dimensions of student learning is important, it is essential to focus equally on the cognitive aspects that are central to active learning - conceptual learning, critical thinking, higher-order thinking and problem-solving, and communication skills.

The findings in this study suggest the need for gathering additional evidence and looking further into the balance between the two aspects of active learning as understood and practiced by teachers and as promoted within pre-service and in-service teacher development programs. Within such an examination it would be important to emphasize that improving the cognitive aspects of teaching and learning should not invite a return to rote memorization and it does not mean introducing more testing of factual knowledge as a substitute for learning. It signifies the opportunity to move forward into more profound understanding of and more effective implementation of active learning through which students gain the ability to use knowledge in the creative and flexible ways that are increasingly required for 21<sup>st</sup> century survival and growth (Abadzi 2006).

*2) Inconsistency in the results on active learning and rote learning:* Teachers and principals emphasized the importance of active and student-centered learning and did not refer to rote learning in the interviews as a classroom strategy associated with quality of education. However, in responding to the survey questions, teachers gave almost equal weight to the importance of students' "class participation" and "reciting what has been said in class." This sounds inconsistent, but at the same time, it is a reflection of what teachers really do in the classroom; they mix the forms (groups and discussions) and some of the strategies (posing questions to groups) of active learning with the memory-based learning that the curriculum and examinations require. The persistence of rote learning in the midst of policies encouraging active-learning in Ethiopia and other countries may be the result of two factors:

- Teachers juggle the demands of a misaligned system: When teachers reach their classrooms, they often face contradictions. The crowded and rigid curriculum and textbooks, filled with information that must be memorized for examinations, may be at odds with what teachers have learned about active-learning practice as part of pre-service and in-service professional development programs. This prompts teachers to fall back into teacher- and subject matter-centered, rote memory approaches. It raises questions about how teachers should practice in the midst of such an apparent misalignment.
- Teachers lack preparation for using the cognitive dimension of active learning in their classroom practice. There is little evidence that the conceptual learning, critical thinking, and higher-order thinking skills essential to active learning are widely taught, modeled, or practiced in the pre-service and in-service teacher development programs. As a result,



there may be genuine lack of understanding among teachers, principals, supervisors, and teacher educators of how to focus on these essential aspects of active learning and little support for teacher learning in these areas. If this hypothesis is correct, it suggests the need for an examination of the way in which different pre-service and in-service teacher development programs promote active learning.

*3) Building on success in affective areas of active learning:* The findings in the Ethiopia study suggest that the foundation has been established for improving quality through the promising and positive perspectives and attitudes of teachers and principals as expressed in the interviews and survey. Teachers' and principals' expanded concepts of their roles as educators, their commitment to a holistic view of and approach to their students, and their recognition of the importance of a positive and supportive learning environment suggest that a foundation has been established for the improvement of quality of teaching and learning.

*4) The importance of the process - examining stakeholders' perceptions of quality and including stakeholders in planning and monitoring/evaluating processes:* An important outcome of the study of teachers' and principals' conceptions of education quality is the process itself. A process of understanding stakeholders' perspectives and including them in the development, implementation, and assessment of policy is important because of the information it reveals. The process can also be important in and of itself; an empowering and inclusive process of engaging stakeholders may be a promising way of addressing the frequently weak link between policy and practice by creating a two-way communication between more central and more local levels that simultaneously informs and mobilizes policies that promote education quality.

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